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Issue Number 20 November 1985

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Pragma's
PRODUCT PROFILES
Issue #20 • November 1985
Product Profiles is published periodically by:
Semaphore Corporation
207 Granada Drive
Aptos, CA 95003
Telephone 408-688-9200

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Unix: A New Home For Pick

Almost two years ago, our very first issue of *Product Profiles* mentioned a new product called Upix, for running Pick software on Unix systems. We completely lost track of Upix until it was mentioned in our recent interview with Jim Pyles, Director of Product Marketing at VMark Computer Inc., with headquarters in Natick, Massachusetts.

Pragma: *What is VMark's product, and why should it be of interest to Pick users?*
Pyles: VMark's product is software called uniVerse, which is a Pick and Prime Information compatible system that runs on top of the Unix operating system. We think it's an exciting product because, for the first time, it gives Pick users and dealers access to the emerging world of Unix, in terms of new hardware, new technology, and some major new players like AT&T.

Pragma: *So everything Pick users now do on Pick machines can be moved to machines operating under Unix?*
Pyles: Exactly.

Pragma: *How did VMark get started, and what's been its history?*
Pyles: The company was started by a group of Pick and Prime Information dealers on the East Coast, who essentially wanted to take control of their destinies. Initially they formed a company with the idea of putting Pick on a fault tolerant system, and later evolved the idea of putting Pick on top of Unix. The company was formally founded in February 1984, when development was begun. Early in the development cycle, we encountered a product here on the West Coast called Upix, by a firm in Irvine called Alfa Computer Enterprises. We acquired that product, brought the developers back to the East Coast, and completed development, releasing it as uniVerse in March of 1985.

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Pragma: *And since March?*
Pyles: We have been porting the product to a number of new hardware systems. The initial implementation of uniVerse was done on Pyramid Technology hardware. We have since entered into agreements with not only Pyramid, but with Convergent Technologies and AT&T, to offer their hardware as well.

Pragma: *What's VMark's current size and organization?*
Pyles: We are twenty-one people. At this point, we're rather heavy on the engineering side. I think we have nine people in engineering and quality assurance.

Pragma: *What do you mean when you talk about offering AT&T and Convergent hardware? Are you selling products to end users or dealers? Or are you selling software licenses to manufacturers?*
Pyles: VMark is acting as a systems integrator and the master distributor. We are purchasing hardware products from the computer manufacturers and selling them through our dealers, together with the uniVerse operating software.

Pragma: *You only sell complete systems? You don't sell just the software to someone who already has a Unix machine?*
Pyles: We also make the product available as software only.

Pragma: *How is VMark different from other Pick vendors?*
Pyles: VMark is the only company that has a Pick compatible system running on Unix. That gives us two things, one of which is an extremely broad range of completely compatible hardware. You can buy a system from VMark or its dealers that runs the range from $5000 at the end user price level, to half a million dollars, and the same application software that runs on the $5000 system will run on the half million dollar system. The other thing is that the industry is headed toward Unix. There is an enormous commitment to Unix. And because we are based on Unix, VMark offers access to that marketplace and all that emerging technology. There are something like a hundred computer vendors right now producing Unix systems, and every single new computer company that's come along in the past couple of years has donned Unix. Now we see AT&T in the marketplace, and IBM getting into Unix, so it looks like a pretty fair bet.

Pragma: *Is a user of your system really taking advantage of Unix, or is Unix just a vehicle to provide uniVerse?*
Pyles: The end user buys solutions, so the real value of uniVerse at that level is one of preservation of software investment. But for the system developer, it really does provide a lot of flexibility and capability not available with Pick. There's a tremendous amount of software development being done right now for Unix. Dealers will be able to integrate off-the-shelf products with uniVerse, and have them all work together. Things like word processors, electronic mail, networking, and communications. The architecture of Unix makes that very easy to do.

Pragma: *Why should someone want to buy more than just your software from you?*
Pyles: We're a single supplier, a single source of software and, more importantly, we provide support. We are in the process of building a support organization that we feel will be among the best in the Pick world, and in the industry. We are essentially a distributor, and are set up to be responsive to our dealer's requirements.

Pragma: *How do you evaluate the Pick operating system and its market? How will you fit in or influence it?*
Pyles: Pick has been mis-positioned all along, by calling it an operating system. What Pick really is is a data management system, the finest that's come along for developing business applications. We intend to promote it as such.

Pragma: *What are your sales goals and*

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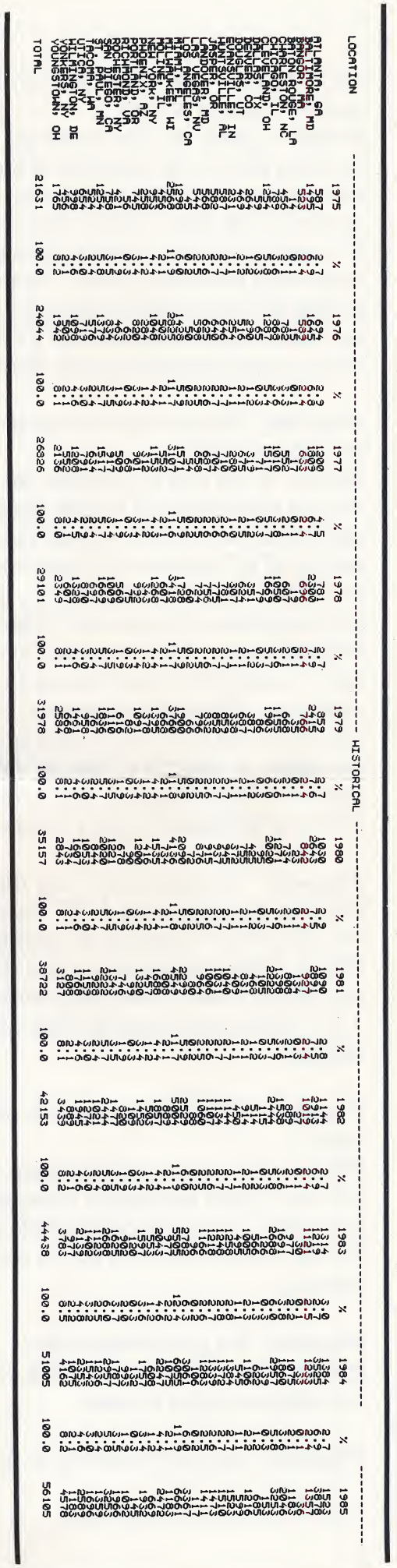

future plans? Will VMark take over the Pick world? Coexist with it?
Pyles: I guess we see ourselves playing a very key part in the evolution of the Pick marketplace. I think it's no secret that, in the context of the Pick versus Unix controversy, Pick seems to have stalled out in terms of expanding its market share. That's obviously a situation we would like to reverse. We feel our recent agreement with AT&T is a very key event in terms of turning that around.

Pragma: *Can you be more specific about that agreement?*
Pyles: At the end of October, we announced that we entered into a master distributor agreement with AT&T, where VMark will be selling AT&T hardware in conjunction with uniVerse. But more importantly, that AT&T had endorsed uniVerse and VMark at the highest levels. The thing that Unix has really been lacking heretofore has been applications software. In a single fell swoop, the number of available Unix application packages has been multiplied by a factor of five, by virtue of the fact that Pick software is now available to the Unix marketplace on AT&T equipment.

Pragma: *The agreement only means you're going to be able to sell AT&T hardware, and not that AT&T is going to be selling uniVerse?*
Pyles: Well, there's also a joint promotion of our products, and there are provisions for the AT&T direct sales force to work with VMark dealers.

Pragma: *What are the specific goals for your sales?*
Pyles: Let me just say that there have been a number of very successful companies in the Pick world. A very good example would be Ultimate. We'd certainly like to emulate their success.

Pragma: *Are you private now?*
Pyles: Yes. VMark is a private company. We are venture capital funded.

Pragma: *So you're planning to go public eventually?*
Pyles: At some point, yes.

Pragma: *How many systems have you shipped so far?*
Pyles: We have about a dozen systems out in the field right now. We're obviously very early in our product development cycle. In the next six months we will be shipping a substantial number of systems.

Pragma: *Have you only installed software so far, or did you also sell machines?*
Pyles: We sold machines as well.

Pragma: *Tell us about product pricing, say in the situation where someone has a Unix machine and just wants to buy your software.*
Pyles: Let me just say that we priced uniVerse competitively with other database management products.

Pragma: *You don't want to quote the price?*
Pyles: Well, it ranges upwards from $1000 on the AT&T Unix PC, depending on the size of the machine and the number of users it will support.

Pragma: *How has VMark's progress been different than you expected?*
Pyles: One of the astonishing things is that we executed our original business plan pretty much to a tee, and we're exactly where we expected to be when we formed the company about two years ago. One observation is that quite possibly it wasn't the best time to be starting a computer company. The industry is certainly in a downturn. It's made everyone very cautious. That's been a factor.

Pragma: *It seems every major development in the history of Pick was hailed as the new breakthrough that would finally blow the market wide open and make Pick a tremendous success, only to end up as almost a flash in the pan compared to the initial projections. What is it that is going to guarantee VMark's greatness in Pick history?*
Pyles: Actually, the Pick market is fairly

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strong. In 1985, we figure that something like a billion dollars worth of hardware, software, and services is going to be delivered by Pick vendors at the end user level. And that's in the context of a small business computer marketplace that's only something in the range of 16 to 20 billion dollars, depending on how you count it. Pick actually has an appreciable share. In contrasting VMark with previous Pick developments, there are two things: first, we set out to create a very professionally managed company, and to do it right, with the proper combination of venture capital and an experienced management team. The other point is that we feel the AT&T connection is very key because, for the very first time, there is a major manufacturer of hardware who has taken a position in the Pick marketplace.

Pragma: *Who's going to be your toughest competition and why?*
Pyles: If you look at the market share statistics in the Pick world, the Ultimate Corporation is obviously the leader in that context. They would be our competition. In another sense, we at VMark really don't see ourselves as competing in the Pick world. We're trying to take Pick out and really broaden its distribution channels and how it is perceived.

Pragma: *If some end user wants to buy a Unix machine with a lot of applications software, who might they bump into instead of VMark?*
Pyles: At this point in the Unix world, there's actually not a lot of applications software, so we feel we have a very strong position there. There are other data management products available for Unix. Things like Oracle, Informix, and Ingres are some of the leading products, but none of those really have substantial bases of applications software available, sitting on the shelf ready for sale, supported by dealers who know how to install and support those kinds of solutions.

Pragma: *If Unix is such a huge, attractive market, and there's such a lack of applications software, how come only VMark seems to have realized there's a vacuum to fill? Where's the competition?*
Pyles: Well, we've taken a unique approach and tapped into a huge market of existing applications software. The other approach that's been taken in the Unix marketplace is to try and develop applications software from scratch, and that just takes a long time. That's

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one of the reasons the Unix applications market has taken such a long time to mature, and really hasn't met the initial growth expectations. It's on a fast track, but it's taking a bit longer than everyone's expected.

Pragma: *What kind of applications software is currently running under uniVerse?*
Pyles: Just to clarify, it's not *our* applications software, but our dealer's applications software. There are packages available in pretty much any vertical you can think of: trucking distribution, health maintenance organizations...

Pragma: *Running on uniVerse now?*
Pyles: Yes, on uniVerse today. Packages that are being converted. Most of our dealers have multiple verticals.

Pragma: *What do you offer in the way of developer support? If a dealer or software house is interested in offering their Pick packages under uniVerse, what are you going to do for them?*
Pyles: The first thing we're going to do is invite them to port their software, to see just how easy that is to do.

Pragma: *Does that mean they have to buy a machine?*
Pyles: Well, if it's a question of try it and see, we have facilities available both in our Natick home office and in San Jose.

Pragma: *Can developers get an AT&T system from you immediately?*
Pyles: Yes, place an order today.

Pragma: *Then when would it be delivered?*
Pyles: Within thirty days.

Pragma: *What are your plans as far as remaining compatible with other Pick implementations?*
Pyles: Our intention is to remain compatible

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Pragma: *What do you do when one BASIC statement is interpreted five different ways by five different implementations?*
Pyles: The user can customize uniVerse on an account by account basis. For example, it seems every Pick implementation does the LOCATE statement a different way. Depending upon how you've got your account set up, uniVerse interprets a LOCATE according to whether this is a Microdata or Pick or Prime Information account.

Pragma: *What about future compatibility? Are you planning to add your own features, or always just try to cover what the other implementations offer?*
Pyles: No, we'll be adding our own capabilities, as well as trying to maintain compatibility with other versions. And we're obviously going to track whatever Pick standards emerge.

Pragma: *UniVerse is completely written in C. Tell us something about performance.*
Pyles: We have extensively benchmarked our product on the hardware we offer. Across the board we meet or exceed the price/performance of comparable Pick based products. A question that frequently comes up is if running Pick on top of Unix costs something in performance. The answer really is no. In fact, we benefit by the fact that the hardware we're running on is newer technologically, and offers superior price/performance. A good example of that would be the Pyramid system, which is based on a reduced instruction set computer architecture. The results are very high performance at relatively low cost compared to traditional machines.

Pragma: *Are there any features a Pick user would say are missing in uniVerse?*
Pyles: Not a thing. It's all there.

Pragma: *What about the spooler?*
Pyles: That's there as well. In fact, it turns out the standard Unix spooler actually does not offer all the features really needed for a commercial environment, so we ended up having to write our own spooler.

Pragma: *What kind of response to uniVerse have you received from Pick Systems?*
Pyles: We have had informal communications with Pick Systems. They are obviously not thrilled about what VMark has done. We are not a Pick licensee. In terms of development of the product, we have not employed any people who ever worked for Pick Systems. We never had access to any of Pick's code. We are squeaky clean. UniVerse is an independent development which just happens to be Pick compatible. Δ

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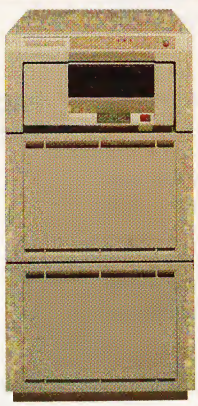

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